DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 131 455 CS 003 058

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TITLE Beyond the Open Classroom: Reaching the Child Through the Establishment of a Learning Environment.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (21st, Anaheim, California, May 1976) ; Not available in hard copy due to marginal reproducibility of original

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Classroom Environment; Elementary Education; *Language Arts; *Learning Activities; *Open Education; Program Descriptions; School Study Centers; *Student Interests; Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

A structured language arts program based on children's interests can enrich the learning environment of the open classroom. This program should include both open-ended activities, which are outgrowths of instructional units based on group interest, and directed activities, which include the use of learning stations that teach the basic skills necessary for mastery of important concepts. Knowledge of performance objectives, careful planning, record keeping, and evaluation of results are all vital components of this program. (Author/KS)

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ED131455

Beyond the Open Classroom: Reaching the Child Through the Establishment of a Learning Environment

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Paper presented at the Twenty-First Convention, International Reading Association, Anaheim, California. May 13, 1976.

CS 003 068

Abstract

It is possible to introduce a structured language arts program based on children's interests into open classrooms. Such a program will enrich the learning environment as well as provide basic skills. This environment includes open-ended and directed activities. Open-ended activities are an outgrowth of units based on group interest. Directed activities include learning stations that focus on the mastery of basic skills essential to meaningful investigation of the unit. Knowledge of objectives, planning, record-keeping, and procedures for evaluation are components of this program.

Trends in education have been compared to a pendulum. When an innovation is publicized, educators rush to reproduce it, often because they hope it is the solution they constantly seek. One may fault them for seizing upon innovations too quickly, but certainly they cannot be faulted for seeking answers. Unfortunately, when their expectations are not immediately realized, the innovation is summarily rejected and old methods are quickly reinstated(Troost,1973). Certainly a more beneficial approach would be to examine the philosophy, the practices and the immediate results of an innovation and then undertake a preliminary evaluation. Such an evaluation should consist of identification of the strengths and weaknesses of aprogram, followed by planning that builds on the strengths. Only in this manner will education truly move forward.

During thepast ten years, in the field of language arts, two approaches have attracted an exceptional amount of attention, open education and reading skill centers. It is interesting to note that these two concepts are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Nevertheless, these disparate approaches have much to offer one another. While diagnostic-prescriptive reading programs have been criticized for replacing the inherent excitement of reading with with mastery of basic skills, the open classroom concept has been similarly criticized for rejecting skill mastery for the sake of openness. But rather than follow the pendulum swing, unbiased evaluations need to be undertaken.

Thus, upon examination, it appears that wht the reading labs have in abundance the open classroom often lacks,i.e., a structured environment (Sun,1975). But if one speaks of open classroom, can one legitimately speak of structure? The answer to this question is a strong and definite yes.

Whereas, it is true that open classrooms differ from place to place, they still share certain fundamental concepts and constructs. Overall, there is a basic humanistic attitude towards children, More specifically, opportunities are

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provided for children to explore, to interact, to find out. Optimum use is made of children's interests and language is recognized as a vital part of a child's learning experience. These premises sound so promising that teachers, in their exuberance to embrace them, have sometimes neglected the basic skills. Yet Featherstone (1971), one of the foremost advocates of open education has stated that mastery of basic skills is even more important to the child who is expected to become an independent learner than to the child who is constantly directed in his learning.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon those who understand the strengths of open education, to find the techniques to compensate for its weaknesses. The program outlined in the following pages offers a learning environment that is open, yet it is structured so as to help children acquire the basic skills necessary for the pursuit of independent learning.

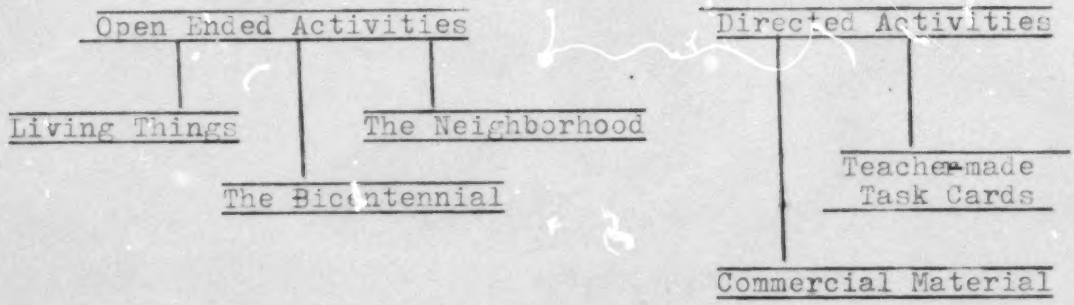
The Learning Environment: An Overview

Curriculum development in the open classroom is based, to a large extent, upon the writings of Jean Piaget. In particular, Piaget has stated that children learn best through interaction with their environment (1955). Thus, it follows that when their environment is limited learning is limited. An adequate learning environment provides opportunities for children to pursue their interests and at the same time acquire the skills necessary for intellectual growth. In addition, provision must be made for the various abilities of the children involved. An environment that does not do this is a limited one.

Basically, involvement and interaction consists of two major types of activities: open-ended and directed (Table 1).

Table 1

The Learning Environment



Open Ended Activities consist of themes such as Living Things, The Neighborhood or any theme that is related to the interests and abilities of the group.

Directed Activities consists of materials and tasks that are skill oriented. Wherever possible these tasks are related to the themes. Only those pupils who have shown a need for direct teaching or reinforcement of these specific skills are assigned to these activities.

Initiating a Theme: Instruction and Guidance

A theme is introduced to the whole class as a problem to be solved: What kind of animals would be appropriate in a classroom? This topic can be stimulated in various ways such as visiting a zoo, inviting a zoologist to the class or simply introducing a new word, hibernation. Various concepts are discussed and ideas shared. According to their ability and interests, children investigate different areas. This is done in small groups as well as individually.

The following activities can be developed:

1. Building a cage - size of the cage based on the needs of the animals, investigation of the materials needed (mice squeeze through small spaces, rabbits need room to stretch,

snakes need a place to hide from sunlight, gerbils need room to build a nest to store food).

2. Care of the animals - research the natural habitat to discover the temperature and kinds of food needed,(rabbits wash themselves daily, garter snakes prefer live fish placed in a bowl of water).

3. Growth of the animals - use a scale, keep a chart and/or graph comparing the weights,observe changes (why does the snake shed its skin, why do the rabbits look fatter in cold weather even though they don't weigh more)

4. Observations - the relationship between the animal's physical characteristics andthe animal's behavior (gerbils have strong teeth that they use to break up cardboard for a nest, the rabbit perks up his ears when food is dropped into the cage).

At the Greenwich Village Charrette School, Public School 3, District 2, Manhattan which is an experimental school in open education, the above theme was investigated by a non-graded class of thirty children, ages five to ten. It was obvious that the activities encompassed many curriculum areas. However the greatest growth was in the area of Language Arts. The stimulation that this learning environment provided, became apparent when we looked at the results. The following examples illustrate some of the ways that the children utilized their skills to creatively express their ideas.
Using the dictionary for descriptive vocabulary:

Dictionary Words You Might Want To Learn - Jon - Grade 3
Gerbils are very fascinating animals.
Fascinating means to be very interesting.
A gerbil is a mammal.
A mammal is an animal that drinks milk from its mother.

Rabbits are herbivorous.
Herbivorous means eat grass or soft plants.

Using one's imagination:

How the Rabbit Got a Short Tail

Caroline Jolly Grade 4

Once upon a time a family of rabbits lived by the great, green, ghostly forest. The smallest rabbit was named Hoppity. In those days the rabbits had a long tail all colored like a poisonous snake. At the end of the tail, near the rabbit it was black or white. Now little Hoppity was hopping in the forest one day when he heard a funny noise then he saw a man ! Little Hoppity ran into the bush but his tail stuck out. Hoppity was so scared he shook. The man thought it was a snake and chopped off the tail. That is how the rabbit got his short tail.

Observing and recording:

The Rabbit - Adina - Grade 2

I don't think the rabbit needed a boyfriend. She jumped out of the cage after he was there a while. She probably got tired of him.

The Guinea Pig - Robert - Grade 2

Before we got the boy guinea pig the girl pig never liked to be petted. Now that we have the boy she's much happier and likes to be petted. I guess she needed a boyfriend.

As the children worked, the teacher directed them to previously prepared learning stations. These learning stations contained materials that stimulated learninge related to the theme.

When the whole class would benefit from a particular lesson, children were brought back together. They also met as a group to share ideas and make decisions.

The themes that are selected usually share common skills (Table 2).

Table 2

Skills Related to a Theme

Observing	Record Keeping
Thinking	Handwriting
Divergent Convergent	Spelling Vocabulary
Logic	Graphs
Cause and Effect	

Data Collection	Research	Sharing
Charts	Interviews	
Descriptions	Library	
Note Taking		
Pictures		

Most children need guidance in acquiring the basic skills.

Guidance can be provided by the use of Directed Activities at the learning stations. Results of standardized and teacher-made tests and observations are utilized in planning these activities. In addition, on-going diagnosis based on teacher observations are valid and at times more appropriate. The activities vary from teacher made task cards (Table 3) to readily available commercial material.

Table 3

Teacher Made Task Cards

Learning Packet #7

Sequence

Can you put these sentences in the correct order?

Now we have four gerbils.
They bought three gerbils and a new cage.
Some children went to the pet shop.
The gerbils went into the new cage.

Can you draw a cartoon strip using these sentences?

Ideally, the goal is to help children learn how to learn. Initially the children will need a great deal of guidance and instruction. As they develop initiative and decision-making skills, they will become more self-directed and self-motivated.

Management

The program outline presented here necessitated a somewhat new dimension to the role of the teacher. It is the task of the teacher to facilitate thelearning process and this can not be acheived without an understanding of management techniques. Most of these techniques are used in all good programs. They include planning. methods of giving contracts and record keeping.

Planning

First, the theme is chosen with its concommitant activities. The necessary materials are prepared. Realistic expectations for the group are decided upon. If the theme is to last more than several weeks, and most worthwhile themes do, then monthly planning is necessary. This in turn is segmented into weekly plans, which are easier to implement. However, one must bear in mind that these plans are flexible and allow for constant revisions. Table 4 offers a format that can be adapted to meet most situations. At times, the class, group or individual activities will develop from the themes. But acquisition of certain skills will necessitiate activities that have no

immediate relationship to the theme. This is particularly so in the area of mathematics. Therefore provision must be made for skill learning beyond the scope of the chosen theme. This problem is solved by the use of individual contracts, samples of which are shown in Table 5.

Table 4

Planning

1. Theme - long range
2. Monthly - long range
3. Weekly

Week of _____

Monday	Language Arts	Social Studies	Science
Class			
Groups			
Individual			
Tuesday			
Class			
Group			
Individual			

etc.

Theme
- Activities
- Materials
- Expectations
- Follow-up (next week)

This suggested format can be adapted to meet the needs of various classroom or school situations.

Table 5

Contracts

(1) Checks and Stubs

Station#	To_____
Activity#	Activity____
Date	_____
No.	Date_____
	No.

(2)

Theme
Activty _____
_____
Station_____
Name Date

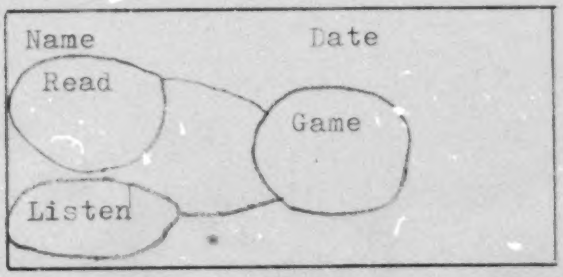
(3) Open Ended

Name_____ Date_____
I will work with _____
I will complete the following
_____
_____

(4) Reading Contract

Date Started
Read _____
_____
Do Card_ Station __
Date Completed _____

(5) Flow Chart Kg.and Grade 1



All contracts are prepared and/or discussed cooperatively. At times a group of children investigating the same area will have the same contract, at other times individual contracts are used. The ideal contract is number 3 of Table 5. The child who

can profit from this type of contract is one who is self-motivated, self-directed and can successfully complete a given task with very little guidance. For most children a more directed contract is necessary. A basic goal of the program is to assist children in moving from directed activities to more creative, open activities. The accomplishment of this goal is difficult but rewarding.

Record Keeping

Record keeping has always been looked upon as a tedious but necessary chore. Records serve several important functions. In particular, they assist in keeping track of individual progress as well as group progress. and thus facilitate planning. Records need not be detailed but must be easily available for constant references. No one format can possibly be appropriate for the differing needs of teachers. Suggested formats are indexed notebooks, samples of children's work in folders, contracts in duplicates, list of appropriate skills with room for children's names, individual progress charts or chek off cards. These records are invaluable tools for the following years planning, particularly when such planning is individualized.

The program as presented is structured without being rigid. Possibilities abound for expansion to other themes and units thus avoiding the inflexibility that makes many programs impractical except in particular classroom or school situations. This is rightly and properly so, the varying expectations and capabilities of teachers and children create problems of extraordinary dimensions. Solutions can be found within the confines of a structured open program.

It is our belief that with this tool educators will have a schemata that can be adapted and adjusted to fit the needs of the class, teacher, school and community.